

# Temple history: more than a Boston saga

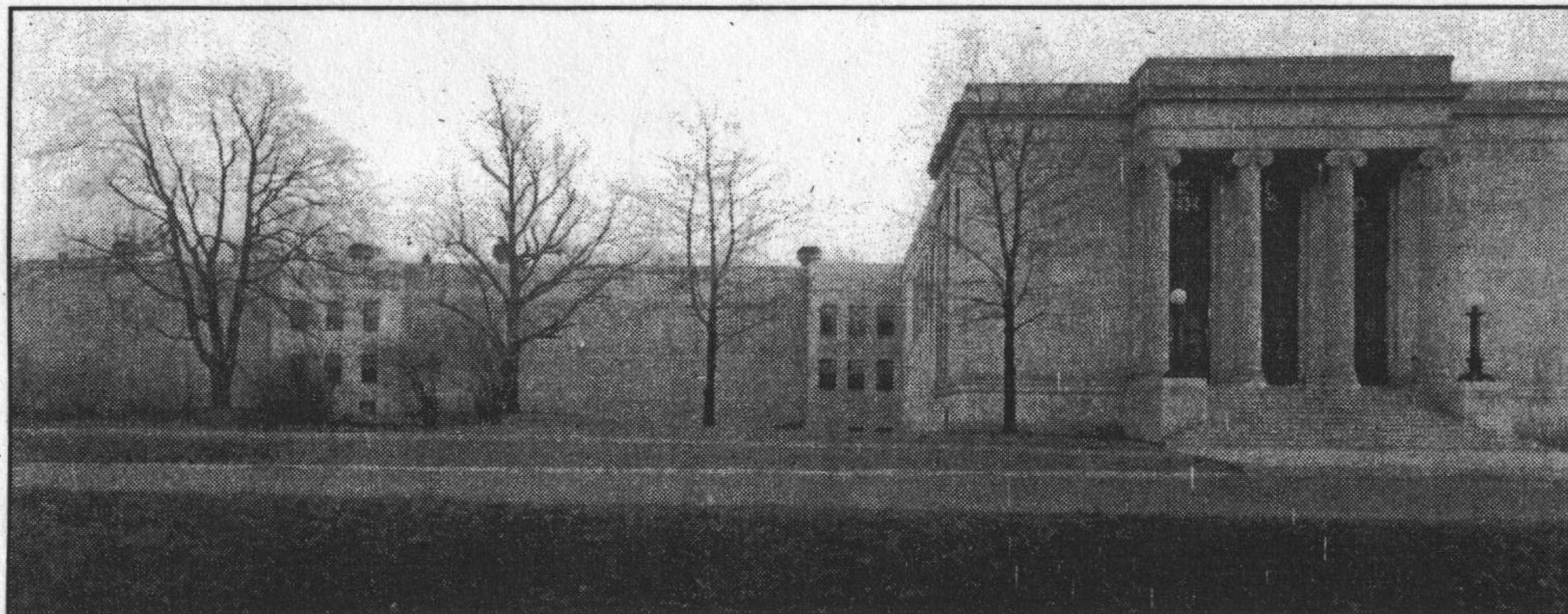
By Morton I. Teicher

Synagogue histories are usually of interest only to members of the congregation about which they are written. This one, carefully researched to observe the 150th anniversary of Boston's Temple Israel, is an exception to that general rule. It will appeal to all residents of Boston, to members of the Reform movement nationally, and to everyone wanting to know more about the saga of Jews in America.

Founded in 1854 as Congregation Adath Israel by a small group of German Jews in order to observe the practices of Reform Judaism, what eventually became Temple Israel flourished from its original status as a German shul to become the largest Reform synagogue in New England. Its development can be recounted through the contributions of the eight men who served as senior rabbis and the two "hazans" who preceded them.

The best known member of this group was Joshua Loth Liebman who came to Temple Israel in 1939. He moved the congregation to modern Reform Judaism, introducing Friday night services, more Hebrew prayers and reinstating bar-mitzvahs. Liebman broadcast sermons on country-wide networks, stressing a psychological approach. He helped to reduce anti-Semitism in Boston and worked to aid European Jews during World War II.

In 1946, he published "Peace of Mind," a spiritual guide to healing and forgiveness based on his training in psychology and his years in psychoanalysis. It turned out to be an international best-seller with more than a million copies in print. Liebman was transformed into a national figure, and, in 1947, he turned down an offer to become the rabbi of New York's prestigious Temple



Temple Israel in 1928

## Book Review

"Becoming American Jews: Temple Israel of Boston," by Meaghan Dwyer-Ryan, Susan L. Porter and Lisa Fagin Davis. Waltham: Brandeis University Press; Hanover: University Press of New England.

Emanu-El. A year later, at the age of 41, Liebman suddenly died of a massive heart attack. He was mourned throughout the country.

Roland B. Gittelsohn, who served as Temple Israel's rabbi from 1953 to 1977, also made his mark beyond the sanctuary's walls. He was an advocate for civil rights and the peace movement, and a vocal critic of McCarthyism. He helped the congregation to participate in social action initiatives.

These two rabbis, their predecessors and followers were involved in varying degrees with one of the persistent issues in American Jewish congregations: the often contentious relationship between board members and

the rabbi. The rabbi occupied (and occupies) a difficult position as both leader of the congregation and as its employee. When Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan was offered the pulpit of the nation's first Reconstructionist synagogue, he accepted based on the condition that he *not* be paid. Rabbis are rarely in Kaplan's financially privileged position so that this question remains a bone of contention in American congregations as it was with several of Temple Israel's early rabbis.

The book also expands on other aspects of American Jewish history such as the growth and change of Reform Judaism, the increased role of women in Jewish life and the troubled relationships a century ago between German Jews and East European Jews. While successfully stressing the story of one congregation, the authors – historians all – have managed to extrapolate a depiction of developments affecting the entire American Jewish community.

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Rabbi Joshua Loth Liebman became a nationally known figure with his radio broadcasts in the 1940s.



Newspaper clipping from 1917, when Temple Israel was on Comm. Ave.